A Bookman's Day Book

By Lurton Rascoe

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22.

ANZIA YZIERSKA, author of "Hungry Hearts" and "Salome of the Tenements," asked me to lunch to-day to meet **James Harvey Robinson**, the author of "The Mind in the Making," that remarkable history of ideas which has now been on the best selling lists for nearly a year. Miss Yzierska is an extremely emotional, acutely sensitive woman, with almost no mental discipline or training and only a meager education, who has somehow managed in the stories of hers that I have read to give life and vividness and drama to her pictures of the Ghetto. While we were waiting for Dr. Robinson she told me that only yesterday Dr. Robinson had told her something about herself which was to save her many heartaches. She asked me if I was interested in psychoanalysis and if I knew anything about the inferiority complex, to which I replied that, while what the psychoanalysts call an inferiority complex is responsible for a great deal of pain, it is also supposed to be responsible for nearly all the great achievements in the world. She said that as a child she was brought up amid the poverty and squalor of the East Side, and that her inferiority complex at that time manifested itself in a fear and envy of the rich and powerful, and that since she had begun to write it manifested itself in a fear and envy of literary people. "For years I lived an isolated life," she said. "I lived entirely within myself, seeing no one, forming no social contacts. Then I realized that that was bad for me, that I was too much wrapped up in my own dreams and ideas, and that I had to meet people and know what they were thinking and saying and doing. I wanted to know literary people, but I found them so hard to approach I was afraid of them and what they would say about my work. They all seemed to know so much more than I do. Then, when my new book was finished I went around to all the critics and tried to tell them what I had aimed at in my novel, to make them understand me and not dismiss my book as hysterical and overemotional. These people in the Ghetto are high-strung, inarticulate. They are so hungry for little bits of sympathy, love and beauty; they are like children; what seems hysterical or overemotional to Anglo-Saxons in them is a natural state, because they feel so deeply and are not educated enough to articulate their emotions. I tried to explain this; but just what I feared would happen did happen. Reviewers said I was incoherent and hysterical. I was nearly driven out of my head by what they said about my book. And then Dr. Robinson, who is so kind and wise, told me that the tronuble with me was that I had an inferiority complex and that the reviewers had inferiority complexes, too, but of a different order. They are like little children trying to be grown-ups, he said, and to keep their jobs they have to appear to be all-knowing and all-wise, while I am afraid and taken in by their superior air.

"He told me not to worry about what they said, not to pay any attention to them, but to keep confidence in myself and go ahead and do my best, be myself. That is a great load off my mind."

Dr. Robinson, a tired-looking, gray-haired little man, somewhere in the sixties, I should say, with the humorous twinkle of a skeptic in his eye, came in after a while and sat down, saying nothing until something came up about education, particularly about graduate institutions. He was unequivocal in his strictures upon a college education, saying that under our educational systems the four or six or eight years in college are ordinarily only so much waste of valuable time; that in any group of college graduates there is nothing to distinguish them, intellectually, from men who have not been to school; that most graduate students are men who have been unable to come to terms with life and are deferring contact with it under the supposition that by reading and study they will find some magic formula which will enable them to get on. The reason college students seldom learn anything is that the subjects are taught by men who are not at all interested in the subjects they are teaching. "A professor will be giving a course of lectures on the French Revolution," he said. "He has given it over and over again, always out of books, as if it were an isolated phenomenon, unrelated to life, and since he is not vitally interested in it himself he cannot communicate any interest to his students."

Dr. Robinson startled me somewhat by saying that he thought John Dewey's "Human Nature and Conduct" and the volume that preceded it were the "two greatest works of philosophy ever written." **Frank Moore Colby** said something of the sort to me also a few months ago, and I made a mental note to get hold of these works as soon as possible. Some one at the table said that Dewey was not clear or easy for the layman to read, but Dr. Robinson said that Dewey was so busy with his problems that he had not time to learn the art of expressing his ideas in terms every one could understand and that people who came after him could do that for him.

Like most of the modern psychologists, Dr. Robinson puts little faith in what ordinarily passes for thought, finding greater significance in emotion. Above all, he has a contempt for what he calls "the old logicians' method of reasoning." He is, he says, skeptical of all abstract doctrines and generalities. One of our greatest problems, he says, is that of getting the human race out of its infantile stage of emotion and intelligence. We grow up in awe and fear or admiration for our parents, and as we go through life we keep on transferring that awe, fear or admiration to other people or things, even abstractions, relying too little upon ourselves, passing the buck to others for our failures, never growing up. One thing he said impressed me greatly because it is the philosophical kernel of my belief in the impossibility of objective criticism. It is: "There can be no objectivity, because an object is comprehended only subjectively." An object may have an existence in itself, but we can know that object only as it exists in our minds. A form of agreement among men of recognized taste and intelligence may be reached, say, in regard to certain points considered to be merits in a work of art, and in so far as one critic is able to delineate those points he may be said to write objective criticism, but even that sort of objectivity is subjective, after all.

Hazel and I went to dinner to-night at the home of **Miss Dorothy Scarborough**, who gives courses in the short story at Columbia and is the author of "The Supernatural in English Fiction." We found there **Miss Dorothy Brewster, Prof. John Lyon and John Weaver**, and after dinner, with Weaver there to prod my memory with "Tell them about the time"——, I related anecdotes of Chicago literary activity until nearly midnight. The more incredible and comical aspects of that feverish period began, I believe, about the time that **Margaret Anderson**, a beautiful girl eager for culture, came up from the provinces and by sheer force of personality got money for and began issuing "The Little Review." It was a lordly and belligerent little magazine from the first, and Miss Anderson, having only an instinct for and no training in æsthetic matters, sublimely ignorant, but sublimely assured, gathered around her most of the men and women who were seeking individual self-expression, without regard to what tradition had dictated—**Carl Sandburg, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Ben Hecht, Stanley Szukalski, Maxwell Bodenheim, Alfred Kreymborg, Vachel Lindsay, Alexander Kaun, John Cowper Powys, Dr. George Burman Foster, Llewellyn Jones, Jane Heap** and dozens of others. "Poetry: A Magazine of Verse" had already gained an international reputation and was printing contributions from England, France and Italy, as well as from America; and **Maurice Browne** had got his Little Theater much talked about, and **Miss Mary Garden** had helped the interest created in Chicago as a musical center by the late Theodore Thomas and his superb orchestra; but Miss Anderson sounded the proper note of youthful revolt, "no compromise with the public taste," and printed stories and poems by Anderson, Sandburg, Bodenheim and Hecht which had been turned down by every magazine in the country. Europeans began to send contributions; "The Little Review" paid nothing, but poets, artists, novelists, musicians in France and England showed a lively interest in the magazine and considered it an honor to appear in it. Remy de Gourmont wrote that it was the only magazine in English that was not moribund, the only one in which he cared to appear. **Lord Dunsany** sent a story and Miss Anderson returned it, saying, "Why do you send us such drool? Try it on 'The Atlantic Monthly.'" . . . There followed, inevitably, quarrels and professional jealousies, acrimonious debates, schisms, critical wars; all of which showed that art was, with these young people, a living issue, not a museum exhibit. . . . There came the Dill Pickle Club, founded by an out-of-work paperhanger, who was said to have been a bomb-maker for the sabotage squad from the I. W. W. and whose curious forum was attended by about an equal proportion of North Shore society leaders, University of Chicago professors and of pickpockets, morons, soapbox atheists and derelicts of all kinds. **Yeats** and **Robert Nichols, St. John Ervine** and **Frank Harris, Alfred Kreymborg** and **Emma Goldman**, poets, editors, novelists, lectured or recited there and endured afterward the splenetic, ludicrous, ridiculous heckling of the crowd. . . . There was the time when Margaret Anderson stood in the corridor of the Fine Arts Building impatiently inquiring when the revolution was going to begin; there was the time when Ben Hecht's "Dregs" was put on by a Little Theater group on the South Side and the first words uttered by the central character set ears atingle and tongues gabbing for weeks; there was the time when Bodenheim smoked a pipe four and a half feet long on Michigan Avenue and asked pedestrians to light it for him; there was the time when **Waldo Frank** was guest of honor at **Tennessee Mitchell's** house and sat saucer eyed with amazement while two literary antagonists fought for five hours steadily over literature, calling each other names adroitly; there was the time a poet who has a mania for sympathy bandaged his arm which he said he had broken and lived for three weeks at the house of another poet, having everything done for him, until the host insisted that the bandages be changed for fear of gangrene, only to discover that the arm was not injured at all; there was the time when Carl Sandburg and Ben Hecht framed on W. L. George at luncheon so that every time George asked silly questions about the erotic propensities of American women in highly euphemistic and technical terms they would answer him in such coarse and obscene words as they had not thought of since the days they saw them chalked up on outhouses, making George blush to the roots of his hair and choke violently with embarrassment, and there was the time when **Ben Reitman** introduced Emma Goldman at the most exclusive social-literary society in Chicago with a short dissertation on sex which sent women screeching from the room—this same Ben who has now become an ardent Christian and a most respectable citizen; and there was the time—but these anecdotes are almost inexhaustible; they often sound incredible, and many of the best ones cannot be related in a great family newspaper. . . . Chicago's literary renaissance had its comical and ironical side, but it is a lively and, I think, a healthy event. It had more vigor and independence than the one that preceded it—the period of the Whitechapel Club and the "Chapbook" crowd, strange cultural phenomena in what was then the most material and ugly of cities, a period of literary activity which produced a short-lived little magazine which was the first one in English to take notice of the French symbolists, the first to publish translations of Mallarmé. Associated with this period were Percival Pollard, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Hamlin Garland, Vance Thompson, Finley Peter Dunne, George Ade, Eugene Field, Herbert Stone, Henry Blake Fuller, Harrison Rhodes, Hobart Chatfield Chatfield-Taylor, Elia W. Peattie, Opie Read and that chap whose name I forget and whose admirers say Jack London plagiarized in "Before Adam." This group was, of course, long before my time, but I have heard much about it from **Robert Burns Peattie, John Stahl** and others, and I hope that some day Peattie or H. B. Fuller will give us a history of it.

There are times when I have doubts about the directive utility of criticism, but before I leave off this subject I wish to record my belief that the initial stimulus to the period which flowered in "Poetry: A Magazine of Verse," "The Little Review," the Little Theater and all those things in Chicago came from a two-page weekly review of books in "The Chicago Evening Post." On the paper at that time were **Francis Hackett, Floyd Dell, Julian Mason, Tiffany Blake** and **Percy Hammond**. Hackett and Dell had a vast enthusiasm for modern literature and an equally vast enthusiasm for life. They had a free hand. They made of their section a living thing. They introduced Chicago readers to Gorky, Dostievsky, Tolstoy, Samuel Butler, Strindberg, Shaw, Ibsen and a host of others. They wrote with a gusto, without pedantry or academic unction. They wrote about literature in terms of Chicago. Hackett came on to New York and was succeeded by Dell, who was in turn succeeded by **Lucian** and **Augusta Carey**, who also came to New York, leaving the department in the hands of **Llewellyn Jones**, the first critic in this country to hail **Joseph Hergesheimer, Lascelles Abercrombie** and **Walter de la Mare**. . . .

Yes, it was Hackett and Dell and their group of adventurous-minded and enthusiastic reviewers, I believe, who first began to awaken an interest in other modern literature than that exemplified in novels by **Winston Churchill, John Fox jr., Owen Wister, Harold MacGrath** and **Marion Crawford**. They were radical, exuberant, cocksure, aggressive, intolerant, young and not very well educated; but they were alive, intelligent, eager; they loved books and they loved life. They communicated an enthusiasm.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24.

Went motoring yesterday afternoon and danced until late last night, and so I slept until noon. Read the new "Broom," chapters from Dreiser's "A Book About Myself" (which I had read in manuscript a year ago), the Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art about the Egyptian excavations, the Sunday papers, and "Human Character," by **Hugh Elliot** (an excellent book), after which **Arthur Knapp** and I went down the Bowery, dropped in at the Bowery Y. M. C. A. cafeteria to get a cup of coffee and some buns. Hazel and I had some difficulty in getting the children to go to bed and after we got the tree up Hazel wanted to put all the decorations on herself, saying that I was always breaking things, so I assembled the electric train and nearly wore out the batteries playing with it.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

The children were up at 7:15 and in the front room at least five minutes before we got there. Ruth is already the despair of her mother: she seems to be incurably domestic and mid-Victorian, despite her surroundings and her mother's theories about the independence of women. She wanted a baby carriage and dolls and tea tables and dishes and she takes the most maternal interest in these things, tucking away her dolls neatly at night. . . . I foresee misunderstandings, teachings made a mock of, and possibly heartaches. . . . To **Frank Case's** party to-night, where I met a gay throng, with **Marc Connelley** reciting his Christmas greetings, **Herbert Corman** tonsorially replete, **Fania Marinoff** and **Bernardine Szold** in damningly resplendent gowns and everybody very happy. . . . Thence to see **Ben Hecht's** "The Egotist," over the second act of which I laughed heartily and which is, I think, the best vehicle Dreiser has had since "The Great Love."

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26.

Went with **Otto Liveright** to the offices of "The Pictorial Review" to pick up **Arthur Vance** for lunch. In Mr. Vance's office I saw what struck me as the most amusing inscription I could recall having seen on a photograph. It was a picture of Wallace Irwin with the legend: "From Vox Populi to Vox Dei." We dropped in for a chat with **Horace Liveright**, who told us he thinks he has a great book in "The Autobiography of a Bootlegger," the author of which, he says, takes his work very seriously, especially his literary work, and means to tell the truth, frankly, earnestly, sincerely. . . .

At lunch Mr. Vance told us about the days when he worked for Dreiser when Dreiser was editor of a woman's magazine, and how in those days Dreiser was the most cautious of editors, afraid of new ventures and new suggestions, and trying out nothing until he had called for "The Bible" ("The Ladies Home Journal") to see whether it already had the sanction of **Edward Bok**. This is amusing to me, because it was only the other day that Dreiser was telling me that editors haven't the courage to publish something new, unusual, out of the regular run of stuff. Mr. Vance has had the courage to publish a great number of hitherto unheard of writers of merit, and to go counter to editorial superstitions without any appreciable falling off of circulation. On the contrary. . . . Went to see The Theater Guild's production of **Paul Claudel's** "The Tidings Brought to Mary" and enjoyed it as much as anything I believe I ever saw in the theater. **Lewis Galantière** first called my attention to Claudel several years ago and I read this play and "L'Otage" without enthusiasm, almost without interest. I read **Jacques Rivière's** study of Claudel in "Etudes" and still failed to find in his poetry or his drama much that impressed me; but to-night I enjoyed the same sort of sustained satisfaction from this play that I get out of a César Franck chorale or a Brahms symphony—not one moment of great emotional stress but also not one moment of relaxed attention: a dramatic work of sheer æsthetic harmony and loveliness. A great deal of the credit for this is due, I think, to Komisarjevsky, the producer, who punctuates the episodes with a mute chorus of nuns and uses but one setting (designed by Lee Simonson) for the five acts designated by Claudel. That is what it means, I think, to exercise imagination in the production of a play; it is to improve upon the intention of Claudel without altering the poet's text.